1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOMES OF THE LEPCHAS

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133 Zongu is a roughly triangular portion of very mountainous land, approximately forty miles on each side, bounded on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the river Talung and on the third side by the mountains south of Kinchenjunga. The land is excessively precipitous; the rivers are at about 2,000 feet above sea-level and the average height of the hills is about 12,000 feet; but the peaks rise to more than double that height, Kinchenjunga at the head of the Talung valley, which dominates the western horizon, being over 28,000 feet. Except for a few artificially levelled places there is probably not a hundred square yards of flat ground in the whole district; and the tracks are too [482 484] steep and too uneven for it to be possible to employ mules, let alone horses; all travelling has to be done on foot, and all goods transported by human porterage.

361 The river valleys are hot, steamy and somewhat malarious, and consequently there are no houses right on the river, though the ground is used for raising subtropical plants; there are however occasional houses about 500 feet higher up. Most of the houses and cultivated land are between 3,500 feet and 7,500 feet above sea-level, a relatively narrow band above the two rivers, though [311] occasionally fields are made at even higher altitudes. Above the cultivated land is the forest in which wild produce is gathered, a [136 137] decreasing amount of hunting done, and to which the cattle are sent up to pasture in the winter months. Above the forest level comes first the rhododendron forest, and then the snows, rarely visited [278] except by hunters searching either for ibex and musk-deer or for the wild aconite which forms the basis of their arrow poison.

132 The climate of the Talung valley is excessively wet, even for the Himalayas; it is only in the autumn months—from the end of September to the end of November—that there is no rain.

3:Nebesky-Wojkowitz E-5 (1950-1953)1953
AK5 Lepcha AK5

elephant, a custom having its origin in the Buddhist religion, which began to spread among the Lepchas four centuries ago.[2] Otherwise, all animals can be hunted at any time, except when having young.

The main weapon of a Lepcha hunter is the bow (*să lí*). It is always made of bamboo, with a string (*să lí grím*) made either of the same material or from a nettle plant, called *kŭ ju*; the best bow-strings, however, are manufactured from the fibres of the *kă fit* tree. The bamboo, which is used for making the bow, has to be carefully selected. It should be cut at the height of the dry season (December—January) from a bamboo growing at a high altitude and in an open spot, where its stem has been frequently bent by the wind. Before using the new bow, it has to be smoked for some time and also later, the bow as well as the arrows rest always on a bamboo platform (*pŭn hróp*), which one finds in Lepcha houses suspended above the open hearth. The bow is kept released and is only spanned when it has to be used.

Arrows (*tsóng*) are made preferably of a reed (*mók tu*) or, less frequently, of bamboo. Normally three steering feathers (*tsóng ro*) — the feathers of a kite or duck being preferred — are set into cuts made previously in the reed and are afterwards glued and fastened with strings. A deep, square or oblong cut (*dem*) is made to receive the bow-string and, lastly, the portion of the reed holding the steering feathers is painted black. To some of the hunting arrows, however, no steering feathers are attached. The barbed arrow head (*tsóng thyak*) is made of iron; it possesses either a short conical metal tube, which receives the shaft or has a short iron rod, which is pushed into the shaft. In the latter case, the end of the shaft is then tightly bound with a string and impregnated with resin. Arrows used to scare away thieves, and the toy arrows of children, do not possess iron points but carry instead a short bamboo tube on the front of the shaft, to render the missile harmless.

Sometimes poisoned arrows are used for hunting and formerly also for warfare. The poison most frequently applied for this purpose is aconite (*pă kí*). An aconite root is kept ready by the hunter and

3: Nebesky-Wojkowitz E-5 (1950-1953)1953
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the poison is prepared only shortly before the hunt begins. The root is ground between two stones and then some water is added to form a thick paste. Lepcha hunters are very careful in handling aconite and should their hands show even a small cut caused during house or field work, they will refrain from using the poison on this day. Should an animal be killed by a poisoned missile, the hunter will wait until the body of the prey has grown cold — »the poison returns then from the heart to the wound« — and afterwards that part of the body, which had been wounded is cut off and thrown away.

Hunting weapons

Four different kinds of bow are used by the Lepchas:

1. The hunting bow in the average 140 cms long. This type of bow was also used in warfare.
2. A bow, in the average 180 cms long, used in marksmanship. The central part of the bow's shaft (*pyăng shing*) is usually strengthened by a piece of bamboo, cut in a typical Lepcha design and fastened to the rod of the bow by resin and strings. The arrows, used for this bow, have a simple, conical iron point without barbs.
3. *Da bryó să lí*, pellet bow, in the average 150 cms long, used for killing birds. The centre of the bow's rod is usually strengthened by a piece of bamboo. Four small, flat slivers of bamboo are bound together in the middle of the bow-string to form a small square, upon which a clay-ball (*da bryó*) can be placed. This central piece of the bow-string is called *să lí bryeng*. The bow-string is fastened to the shaft of the bow in such a way, that it remains slightly turned to the right, allowing the missile to fly past the bow and the hand which holds it. — The clay-balls, used for the *da bryó să lí* are usually burned to make them harder. The pellet bow can be seen very frequently in use during harvest time, when the fields have to be guarded against birds.

3:Nebesky-Wojkowitz E-5 (1950-1953)1953
AK5 Lepcha AK5

in the wall, into which a huge, narrow-woven basket is placed. A beating line is then formed and the fish are driven into the trap.

At a favourable spot, by diverting a river into a channel and then erecting barriers of sand and stone, a small artificial lake is made in the old river bed. Afterwards, huge quantities of *a'ung él* (*Artemisia vulgaris*) are collected, placed into the lake and pounded. Then cut pieces of a strong creeper (*brŭng*) are thrown into the pool, and the juice of these plants disolving in the water will poison all the fish which had been trapped in the artificially made lake.

All the catch, obtained by collective methods of fishing, is eventually divided equally among the participants.

NOTES

1. About the Lepchas see the following publications:
   Hooker, J. D., Himalayan Journals. London 1854.
   Mainwaring, G. B., A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language. Calcutta 1878.
   Das, Kali Kumar, The Lepcha People and their Notions of Heaven and Hell. Journal of the Buddhist Texts Society, Vol. VI, Pt. 1. Calcutta 1896.
   Mainwaring, G. B. and Grünwedel, A., Dictionary of the Lepcha Language. Berlin 1898.
   de Beauvoir-Stocks, C., Folk-lore and Customs of the Lep-chas of Sikhim. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Proceedings. Calcutta 1925
   Gorer, G., Himalayan Village. London 1938.
   Morris, J., Living with Lepchas. London 1938.
   de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. and Gorer, G., The use of thread-crosses in Lepcha Lamaist Ceremonies. Eastern Anthropologist, Vol. IV, No. 2. Lucknow 1951.
   de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R., Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas. Eastern Anthropologist, Vol. V, No. 1. Lucknow 1951.
2. The rites and beliefs, connected with Lepcha hunting and fishing, will be dealt with later in a separate publication.

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

773 and sisters, the Himalaya Mountains, and the lakes and all
776 the rivers, in order that he might become a Bong-thing to
793 help the humans against the evil spirits.

And the child asked It-mo what would be the best things to carry with him on the journey, and the Creator gave him some ginger (salep), some garlic (paki-mun-gu) and a tree, the fruit of which he could place on a stick and burn slowly
[278] like a lamp (the safi-kun). And all these things are used externally and internally by the Bong-thing today, and from all these plants and bulbs medicine is made.

Taking all these bulbs the son came to the Lung-tun-parten tableland in the Himalayas but he found that the Mung had already come to that place; they had, indeed, spread over the whole country; they were in all the mountains and in all the trees and in all the caves. So he said to them, 'I was sent to go round the world, but you seem to be everywhere before me, so I will return to the Creator.'

[753 But when he turned and was leaving the Mung caught
782] hold of him saying, 'On one condition we will do everything you command;—when we worry the human beings with disease and illness we will go away and leave them in peace if, in return, you will give us some fowls, eggs, pigs or any other animals.' The Bong-thing said, 'You force me to do this. Only swear you will leave all human beings in peace. I will call my brothers Sakbri-bu and Sahnang-bu to act as witnesses.' To this they all agreed and at the Partam-Sakber, the Mung swore that when they worried human persons with illness they would leave the sick person in peace were the Bong-thing do attend to the patient, and propitiate them, the Mung, by giving them offerings of a cow, a pig or of several goats. To make doubly sure, the Bong-thing asked the Mung to swear by spitting on a rock there, which they did, and so great was the oath that it shattered the rock to pieces. And again he asked them to swear and spit in the lake which they did; but the oath was so great that it caused the lake to dry up. Yet once more he asked them to swear by spitting on a tree which they did; but the tree could not bear the weight of the oath and it fell. This was the covenant between the Bong-thing and the Mung and we, the Rong folk, believe this is the origin of the Bong-thing.....And when

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
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Besides the knowledge of edible objects the Rong are well acquainted with poisons. They know the secret of a deadly poison for making poisoned arrows. A fairly thick layer is smeared on the lower half of the arrow head but none whatsoever on the point. A very slight wound is enough to kill any animal. The great advantage of this poison is that it does not enter the blood stream but acts locally so that the entire flesh is not poisoned. The injured portion has necessarily to be cut away. The poison consists of a very complicated mixture of ingredients which points to the long experience the Lepchas have in its manufacture. The first ingredient, "Father of the poison" called ning-dyūd, is obtained from Tibet. The theory is that a bird scrapes out of the earth a peculiar root, eats part of it and gains immense strength. The Tibetans collect the remainder of the root and trade with the Lepchas who prepare the poison. Death quickly ensues if even the tiniest fragment of the root is consumed. Another ingredient, bar-lang, is a root, which, in the language of the Rong, is called rog-log. The third ingredient is obtained from gōn-chong. Neither of the roots is found in the high mountains but has to be procured from the neighbourhood of the plains. Yet another root is called se-red in Lepcha, and ga-gra in Nepalese. In addition there is the poison extracted from the root of a shrub which bears a yellow flower, and whose name the hunter could no longer remember. Gōn-liong-rik serves as the "conduct" for these poisons. So potent is the effect of this poison that a person is liable to lose his life even if he inhales the odour it gives off for too long a period. Without the admixture of the poison from Tibet, the other poisons cannot be localised and the entire flesh of the animal would be rendered unedible. Thus we see that the poison for arrows is very complicated and the process of preparation is known only to the Rong. The other people fear them because of this knowledge of poisons.

The fruit of the above-mentioned rog-log is called rog-log-pot, and only a very few people are in a position to procure it. A strong poison is made from it. A poison for the killing of fish is called bū-rū. This is obtained from the leaves of the gol-gung tree by rubbing them down in a mortar. The poison, if thrown into a tank, kills all the fish but in no way makes them inedible.